

Baltimore Yearly Meeting Faith and Practice Revision Committee Proposed Advices, Queries and Voices

Simplicity: Advices

How are we to honor the testimony of simplicity in our modern world? To many of us, our culture seems so “busy” and so complex, so full of disturbing news and distractions, that we are sometimes overwhelmed. Our time is often overcommitted, and our wants are manipulated to make us desire what we do not need. Our consumption of goods as a nation is out of control. In our world, the word “simplicity” may be quickly followed by guilt and then by a sense of frustration, or even despair. We need to think of simplicity not as an impossible demand, but an invitation to a more peaceful and fulfilling Spirit-led life.

Simplicity flows from a well-ordered life. It is less a matter of doing without, than a spiritual quality that simplifies our lives by putting first things first. A simple way of life, freely chosen, is a source of strength, joy, and comfort.

The testimony of simplicity is like a bell that calls us to awareness of the Center. It challenges us to ask “what matters?” It reminds us that much of what worries us and stresses us is not all that important. It asks us to recognize the burdens we carry needlessly and lay them down: our anxiety about our appearance, our struggle to afford what we do not need, comparisons between our lifestyle and the lifestyles of others, squabbles born of tension and stress, worries that leave us exhausted and unable to find time for what matters in our lives. Simplicity is not about an antique form of dress or speech. It is a reminder that today, as surely as hundreds of years ago, we can choose to allow God to order our lives. It asks us to set aside time for prayer and spiritual discipline that open us to wisdom and guidance beyond our own. Today, as then, it refers to a life lit from within by the Inward Light, ordered by the Love that nourishes the core, and freed by the Spirit from bondage to the superficial.

Simplicity: Queries

What in my present life most distracts me from God?

What am I ready to release so that I can give my attention to what matters most?

How do the ways in which I choose to use my time, my possessions, my money, and my energy reflect my most deeply held values?

How do the ways in which we choose to use our community’s resources reflect our most deeply held values?

How do we support one another in our search for a simpler life?

Simplicity: Voices

My mind through the power of Truth was in a good degree weaned from the desire of outward greatness, and I was learning to be content with real conveniences that were not costly; so that a way of life free from much Entanglements appeared best for me, tho’ the income was small. I had several offers of business that appeared profitable, but saw not my way clear to accept of them, as believing the business proposed would be attended with more outward care & cumber than was required of me to engage in. I saw that a humble man, with the Blessing of the Lord, might live on a little, and that where the heart was set on greatness, success in business did not satisfy the craving; but that commonly with an increase of wealth, the desire for wealth increased. There was a care on my mind so to pass my time, as to things outward, that nothing might hinder me from the most steady attention to the voice of the True Shepherd.

John Woolman, c. 1744

I wish I might emphasize how a life becomes simplified when dominated by faithfulness to a few concerns. Too many of us have too many irons in the fire. We get distracted by the intellectual claim to our interest in a thousand and one good things, and before we know it we are pulled and hauled breathlessly along by an over-burdened program of good committees and good undertakings. I am persuaded that this fevered life of church workers is not wholesome. Undertakings

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get plastered on from the outside because we can't turn down a friend. Acceptance of service on a weighty committee should really depend upon an answering imperative within us, not merely upon a rational calculation of the factors involved. The concern-oriented life is ordered and organized from within. And we learn to say No as well as Yes by attending to the guidance of inner responsibility. Quaker simplicity needs to be expressed not merely in dress and architecture and the height of tombstones but also in the structure of a relatively simplified and coordinated life-program of social responsibilities. And I am persuaded that concerns introduce that simplification, and along with it that intensification which we need in opposition to the hurried, superficial tendencies of our age.

Thomas R. Kelly, 1941

Learn the wonderful truth that to increase the quality of life means to decrease material desire; not vice versa.

Richard J. Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity*, 1981, p.123

It's a dangerous thing to lead young Friends much into the observation of outward things, which may be easily done, for they can soon get into an outward garb, to be all alike outwardly, but this will not make them true Christians: it's the Spirit that gives life. I would be loath to have a hand in these things.

Margaret Fell Fox, 1698

[Simplicity] brings sanity to our compulsive extravagance, and peace to our frantic spirit. It liberates us from what William Penn called "cumber." It allows us to see material things for what they are – goods to enhance life, not to oppress life. People once again become more important than possessions. Simplicity enables us to live lives of integrity in the face of the terrible realities of our global village.

Richard J. Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity*, 1981, p. 1

How much interior emigration there is all about us! Students emigrate to the future and are not present where they are. Displaced persons live in the past and refuse to let go to the new homeland and to live where they are. Parents are not present here and now but are living for the day when the children are raised, or when they will retire, or when they will be free of this or that, but remain numb and glazed and absent from the living moment. To be present is to be vulnerable, to be able to be hurt, to be willing to be spent — but it is also to be awake, alive, and engaged actively in the immediate assignment that has been laid upon us.

Douglas Steere, *On Being Present Where You Are*

But the wonderful thing about simplicity is its ability to give us contentment. Do you understand what a freedom this is? To live in contentment means we can opt out of the status race and the maddening pace that is its necessary partner. We can shout "NO!" to the insanity which chants, "More, more, more!" We can rest contented in the gracious provision of God.

Richard J. Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity*, 1981, p. 97

Tis a gift to be simple, 'tis a gift to be free
'Tis a gift to come down where we ought to be
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,
We will be in the valley of love and delight.

When true simplicity is gained
To bow and to bend we will not be ashamed;
To turn and turn will be our delight
Till by turning, turning we come 'round right.

Shaker spiritual

Jesus spoke to the heart of the matter when he taught us that if the eye were single, the whole body would be full of light (Matthew 6:22). Dietrich Bonhoeffer, before he died at the hands of the Nazis, said, "To be simple is to fix one's eye solely on the simple truth of God at a time when all concepts are being confused, distorted, and turned upside down."

Richard J. Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity*, 1981, p. 10